

The Word Made Flesh Series: The Bread of Life

Exodus 16:9-18 and John 6:27-35 – Key verse: John 6:25

Happy Christian New Year! We've come again to the season of Advent, which is the start of the Christian liturgical year. This is also a sacred time of anticipation and preparation to celebrate the first coming of Christ, as an infant. This season is often a time of comings and goings, of traveling to visit loved ones, to return to places and people to whom we feel a belonging, a kinship. Traditional songs of the season speak of these travels in joyous language: "Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother's house we go!" and "O'er the fields we go, laughing all the way!" which paint a Thomas Kincade picture of holiday travel by horse and sleigh that probably strikes us as quaint and fun, maybe nostalgic for times long since passed.

But, as many parents have experienced, not all children travel joyously on holiday trips. Small children almost universally ask, "Are we there yet?" just a few minutes into a long drive. And many often ask to have a snack or to stop for food long before their parents would like to stop, sometimes not because they are hungry, but because they are bored. Of course, us older folks have to stop frequently for other reasons, right? If we don't our bodies will complain.

In a certain way, we can see a similarity here with the people who escaped Egypt and were being led by Moses and Aaron, the Israelites, whom we read about in the Book of Exodus: "They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, 'Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'" (Exodus 16:1-3).

Moses is taking the Israelites out of Egypt and toward the land of Promise, but the people are grumpy. They are tired, and they are hungry. We can relate this story. Maybe we relate to Moses and Aaron, who know that the people will be happy when the journey is over and they've arrived at their destination, but still have to deal with the grumblings of their people in the meantime. Or maybe we relate to the Israelites, who, after over 40 days of wandering in the desert, are getting "hangry." In their discomfort, they are wondering perhaps if, in fleeing the relative stability of Egypt, they've made a huge mistake.

But God, like a caring parent, provides for them, sending them plentiful quail every evening and miraculous bread every morning, bread that they don't even have to make themselves.

It is this story that is recalled in our reading from John's Gospel. Here, in the sixth chapter, we come upon Jesus having fed, just the day before, a crowd of five thousand people. Because of this miracle, the crowd began calling Jesus a prophet. Sensing that the people meant to crown him their earthly king, Jesus had fled across the water, and the crowd finds him the following day. And so, Jesus says to them, "You are seeking me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you" (John 6:26-27).

Both Moses and Jesus tell their respective crowds not to be confused about where their true satisfaction comes from. Moses reminds the Israelites that the bread is from the Lord; Jesus reminds the Galileans that they are thinking with their stomachs and not their spirits—earthly bread is perishable. Jesus says to them, "Truly, truly, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always," Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:32-35).

Jesus and Moses warn us not to put stock in the bread that is perishable, goes stale or gets moldy. Bread from heaven is right in front of us, so why do we not see it? We shouldn't chase after fleeting satisfaction. It sounds easy, doesn't it? We know that the things of this world are temporary, and yet so many of us often find ourselves starving after the next thing—passing fancies that quickly pass away. If we sometimes have a hard time keeping our hearts set on the eternal Bread of Life, we are not alone. The apostles and later Christian writers often learn the truth of Jesus' words the hard way. Theologian and philosopher Augustine of Hippo, in his famous autobiographical work *Confessions*, writes on the very first page, "...because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, [Lord], our hearts are restless until they rest in you." For hundreds of pages after he pens this line, Augustine tells us the story of his own misspent youth, years wasted chasing after the admiration of his peers, the comforts and thrills of romantic liaisons, and prestige in his career. He tells us the story of his restless heart. Nothing, he says, could satisfy the aching hunger within him—nothing except God.

In thinking about the long and winding spiritual journey of Augustine, and the desert wanderings of the Israelites, let us all take a moment and think about our own winding journeys. Have we ever been so certain we wanted a certain thing, only to be disappointed? How did you react in the moment? Thinking back to our earlier example of hungry children, perhaps we remember an instance when a hungry child—maybe one of yours, or maybe it was you—was given a plate of food, only to immediately claim that they were no longer hungry.

This fickle child is much like the crowds in our Gospel reading—perhaps you know how this story ends. Jesus’ words and deeds, while initially a cause for excitement, are rejected. The people cannot accept that this Bread of Life is coming to them through this man, Jesus, who is promising them the Bread of Life. He is too familiar; the crowd knows his parents. This Metaphor about eating his body and drinking his blood is too strange. So, despite the crowd of five thousand having been miraculously fed, they leave him. He does not fit the Judeans’ expectations.

But Jesus is, as the Advent hymn says, “long expected.” This Advent, as we ponder a Savior who comes to us as bread, we pray the words of this song:

“Come, thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set thy people free; From our fears and sins release us, Let us find our rest in thee. Israel’s strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth thou art; Dear desire of ev’ry nation, Joy of ev’ry longing heart.”

Jesus, who offers us hope, comes to us in an unexpected way. We’ll find him in a manger, lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem. Did you know Bethlehem literally means “House of Bread”? Jesus is the bread of life, our true spiritual nourishment. So let us prepare our hearts to receive Christ, our bread from heaven, which does not perish, but satisfies every mortal longing and brings us the hope of eternal life.